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Eye on Intelligence

Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy has once again focused the attention of the Senate on the problem of who is to watch those who watch. He has urged creation of a joint Senate-House committee to keep an eye on federal intelligence-gathering activities. The proposal, though anathema to the Central Intelligence Agency, has great merit.

This is not to suggest that the CIA's objections to congressional oversight are without foundation. It is quite true that intelligence activities are carried on most effectively in secret. There also is some danger that Congress, whose record of discretion is far from perfect, might not prove to be a leak-proof repository of data about intelligence operations.

These objections could be dealt with, however, if proper care were taken in setting up the machinery of congressional oversight. It is apparent—to the public, at least, though many in Congress seem to have a blind spot on this point—that

any joint committee charged with reviewing intelligence operations should not be set up on a seniority basis. Leaders of both parties in House and Senate should choose for such a committee only men with the reputation of being able to keep secrets and of having placed the national interest above mere partisan or sectional advantage. If this were done, the danger of unfortunate leaks of information would be minimized.

The reasons for wanting some such oversight are compelling. As McCarthy said in a Senate speech, if the decision whether or not to wage war is too important to be left to the generals, then "cold war intelligence operations are too important to be left to the specialists who conduct them." Properly safeguarded, congressional watchfulness over intelligence activities could do no harm. It might save the nation from a disaster on some future occasion when intelligence was again crucial.